

# The impact of Black Majority churches in Britain



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## Introduction

Christianity is shifting geographically. Its centre has moved from the Global North to the Global South. It is said that Christianity is growing every day in Africa, Asia and Latin America. And there is even talk of reverse mission, with churches from the former mission fields of the Majority World now sending missionaries and pastors to Europe and North America to spread the gospel. This has led to the common mantra in studies on World Christianity that global mission is no longer the prerogative of churches and mission agencies in the West.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Christianity is on the decline in North America and Europe because the Christian values that once shaped Western civilisations are being eroded due to secularism, pluralism and relativism. However, Black Majority churches (BMCs) in Britain are bucking this trend. BMCs have grown rapidly in Britain in recent decades and are now having a major impact in mission, both domestically and globally. As we shall see, with a particular focus on African Pentecostal churches, BMCs have a rich history and mission is part of their DNA.

## Historical development of African Pentecostal churches in Britain

Before considering what the shift and contributions of BMCs are in regard to global missions, it is important to reflect on their origins

in Britain. I start with the first African Pentecostal church in Britain.

In around 1906 Revd Thomas Kwame Brem-Wilson founded Sumner Road Chapel (now known as Sureway International Christian Ministries) in Peckham, in south-east London. This was the year when the Pentecostal revival of Azusa Street in Los Angeles started, an event which, along with the interracial ministry of the African-American William J Seymour (1870–1922), is thought by some scholars and commentators to be the beginning of the Pentecostal movement. Others argue that it was the formulation of the Pentecostal theology of speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit by Charles Parham (1873–1929) at Topeka, Kansas, that became the basis for the movement. Whatever our view, one thing is clear, the origins of Pentecostalism in Britain is very much linked to the events in Azusa Street.

The 1904 Welsh Revival was the catalyst of the Pentecostal movement in Britain, but it was the influence of the Azusa Street Revival on the likes of TB Barratt from Norway, Cecil Polhill and Alexander A Boddy that led to the start of Pentecostalism in this country. Boddy (1854–1930), then an Anglican priest at All Saints, Monkwearmouth in Sunderland, is regarded as the father of British Pentecostalism because from 1907 his church became a meeting place where different people came to experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit. One of those baptised in the Spirit at one of the revival meetings in Sunderland was Revd Kwame Brem-Wilson, a

## NOTES

1. See A Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001) as an example of the robustness of African Christianity and mission.

2. M Ojo, 'Reverse Mission', in *Encyclopedia of Mission and Missionaries* (ed. JJ Bonk; New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 380.

3. I Olofinjana (ed.), *Turning the Tables on Mission: Stories of Christians from the Global South in the UK* (London: Instant Apostle, 2013), pp. 198–9.

4. While Calvary Charismatic Church is a Baptist Church, they do operate like a Pentecostal Church.

5. D Muir and A Omooba, *Black Church Political Mobilisation: A Manifesto for Action* (a document produced by NCLF, 2015), p. 7.

Ghanaian businessman and schoolmaster at a missionary school back in his homeland.

Brem-Wilson was born in Dixcove, Ghana, in 1855 and came to Britain in 1901. As a result of his attendance and contribution at the revival meetings in Sunderland in 1907, Brem-Wilson developed relationships with Alexander Boddy and Cecil Polhill, founders of the first Pentecostal missionary movement in Britain (Pentecostal Missionary Union). Brem-Wilson was also friends with the founders of the Apostolic Church, DP Williams and WJ Williams, as he hosted an Apostolic Church conference in London in 1923. These relationships were very important, because during that period in history it was not fashionable to be associated with black people. These friendships helped break down racial barriers and demonstrated the international and ecumenical dynamics of early Pentecostalism.

Although Brem-Wilson founded Sumner Road Chapel in around 1906, BMCs, as they are known in the British context today, did not begin to emerge until about the 1940s with the Caribbean migration. The majority of these churches were church plants from their headquarter churches back in the Caribbean or Africa. Examples from Africa include: The Church of the Lord *Aladura*; The Redeemed Christian Church of God; Church of Pentecost; and Victory Bible International Church. All of the above originated in West Africa and sent missionaries and church planters to the UK and Europe. They were the first type of African churches in Britain.

The second type of African churches are those founded here in Britain. They are now sending missionaries and church planters to Europe and other parts of the world. It is to this second group that I will draw attention looking at their efforts in church planting and world mission. However, before that we must consider the meaning of the term 'reverse mission'.

## Reverse mission and migration

Matthew Ojo, an African church historian and theologian, defined reverse mission as, 'The sending of missionaries to Europe and North America by churches and Christians from the non-Western world, particularly Africa, Asia and Latin America, which were at the receiving end of Catholic and Protestant missions as mission fields from the sixteenth century to the late twentieth century.'<sup>2</sup> In this definition, Ojo highlights the shift in the geography and direction of mission from the South to the North. He also mentions the intentionality of mission by the sending of missionaries from the Majority World (Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean).

The sending of missionaries from the South is vital and marks a theological shift, so, for example, in the 1980s many African Pentecostal churches

sent missionary pastors who intentionally came to Britain to plant churches. To this end, in 1984 the Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria sent Matthew Ashimolowo to Britain as a missionary. He is now the senior pastor of Kingsway International Christian Centre.

It must, however, be pointed out that there are those who have migrated for other reasons – including economic, political, educational and

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social factors – but have ended up planting churches and doing mission in Britain. A good example is Bishop Donnett Thomas. Originally from Jamaica, she moved to Britain with her parents in 1954. Bishop Donnett Thomas now leads a Pentecostal church in London (Power of the Living Word Ministries), which also has branches in Kenya and India. She has also served as chair of Churches Together in South London.<sup>3</sup>

## Mission contributions of African Pentecostal churches in Britain

Having considered the global origins of African Pentecostal churches in Britain and the migratory trends in their formation, what kind of impact are they having in this country?

1. African Christians are leading some of the largest churches and church gatherings in the UK. Calvary Charismatic Baptist Church in East London is an example of a large Baptist church led by an African, Francis Sarpong.<sup>4</sup> This church is recorded as one of the largest Baptist Union churches in Britain. Kingsway International Christian Centre has about 12,000 people in attendance over three services and is regarded as one of the largest churches in Britain. In addition, the Redeemed Christian Church of God's prayer gathering, Festival of Life, attracts about 60,000 participants twice a year.

British Christianity is often very cynical about the effectiveness of mega-churches and big gatherings in terms of discipleship. However, many of these churches have well-structured house groups that cater for the needs of people, as well as discipleship training. Mega-churches are significant pointers in a secular society that is trying to marginalise faith in the public square.

2. Some of these churches are pioneering multicultural churches in the major cities in Britain. The term BMCs does not mean that these churches are mono-ethnic or monocultural. The reverse is often the case because they may have people from different parts of Africa and different parts of the Caribbean.

3. Church planting is another contribution of these churches. For example, the Redeemed Christian Church of God started in the Britain in 1988 and today they have planted around 760 churches. Trinity Baptist Church in West Norwood, London, has also embarked on church planting projects in Britain and Europe. Founded by Revd Kingsley Appaigyei in 1987, Trinity is considered to be one of the largest BMCs in Britain. It is also one of the largest Baptist churches in the country, having a congregation of around 3,000 people.

**BMCs' rich history demonstrates that their current involvement in global mission is part of their DNA**

4. These churches have brought fresh energy and passion through their various spiritualities such as watch-night services, nights of prayer, prayer and fasting, confidence in the Scriptures and bold evangelism. Mission and prayer are inseparable for these churches and therefore their mission strategy is deeply rooted in prayers and spiritual warfare.

The fact that African Pentecostal churches and BMCs in general are certainly contributing to British society has been recognised by the government. In 2006 Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister, paid tribute to the role of BMCs when he spoke at Ruach City Church in Brixton, south-east London. In 2007, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, in marking the Prince's 59th birthday, attended a special thanksgiving service held at Jesus House in north London in recognition of the contribution of BMCs to their communities.<sup>5</sup>

While African churches are without doubt making an impact in Britain, they do have their shortcomings, such as a lack of ecumenical partnerships, transplanting African Christianity to Europe without contextualisation (e.g. preaching in the public space with loud speakers may be successful in countries such as Nigeria or Ghana, but it often has a negative impact on white British indigenes because it can be too loud and aggressive), and mono-ethnic mission strategies (e.g. the tendency to attract people of their own nationality such as Nigerians ministering to Nigerians, or Ghanaians ministering to Ghanaians). However, African churches have only been in Europe for a relatively short period. They are still learning and in the process of adapting their new environment.

## African Pentecostal churches and global mission

Several African Pentecostal churches that started in Britain are now involved in global mission through church planting, the use of mass media and telecommunications.

Perhaps the best-known is Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) founded by Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo in 1992. KICC has its own television station, KICC TV, which is viewed in Africa, Europe, North America, Asia and the Caribbean. KICC also run conferences (Winning Ways Africa), hold gospel campaign meetings and do relief work. They also have church plants in the Republic of Ireland, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Namibia.

Trinity Baptist Church in West Norwood is also involved in global missions through church planting, television ministry (ABN TV) and relief work. They have church plants in Italy, Denmark, Netherlands and Ghana. Since 2008 they have also run an orphanage home in Ghana. Trinity Baptist Orphanage (Trinity Hope Centre) was started in response to the overwhelming statistics on orphans and child poverty in Ghana as reported by the United Nations. The Centre works with communities to provide relief for the needs of children, such as hunger, education, medical, emotional, and practical support to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives.

## Concluding thoughts

In conclusion, I have considered the global origins of BMCs by situating their history within the global Pentecostal narrative. This rich history demonstrates that their current involvement in global mission is part of their DNA. Through migratory factors these churches are being planted in the UK and whilst they have their weaknesses, they are, nevertheless, making an impact. They are making their contribution by leading some of the largest churches and Christian gatherings in the UK. Their mission contribution also extends beyond the shores of Britain as they are involved in world missions through church planting strategies and multi-media ministries.